

Arkansas working towards bringing wrestling as state-sponsored sport

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When InterMat trots out its annual recruiting breakdown of each wrestling state, it might have to be renamed "Wrestling's 49."

Why?

With nine Arkansas high schools starting the sport for the 2006-07 season, two more on board for next year and nearly a dozen or so more schools interested, the state could have a sanctioned state championship as soon as the 2007-08 season.

Greg Hatcher, a three-year wrestling team captain at Alma College in Michigan during the 1980s, noticed a void in athletics in the winter time in Arkansas.

He's putting much of his time and money into developing the concept and selling it to schools, hoping they'll bite and pick up on the sport.

One thing that Hatcher isn't hearing is any excuses about financial strain.

"We've started the Arkansas Wrestling Association and we will purchase mats for the first 20 schools," said Hatcher.

On September 27, Hatcher spent much of his morning preparing for press conferences and television interviews. He wanted the movement in Arkansas wrestling to be televised.

"We're out raising money for the mats as we get them," Hatcher said. "Delta Dental was our first corporate sponsor and they've sponsored mats for Bentonville and Episcopal Collegiate."

"I may have to cover some of it," Hatcher said. "We've promised them a collegiate style wrestling mat, 42x42 with all their logos."

Hatcher's well versed in how to start up something.

He's the chairman of the Little Rock Marathon and has been involved in several start-up organizations such as the Mighty Bluebird Soccer Club and the Shootout of the South 7-on-7 football tournament.

"I've just really taken the same experience, I've learned a lot from running those things to get it (wrestling) up and running," said Hatcher.

"The real work is done by the athletic directors and coaches at the schools that are going to be out there everyday to keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble," Hatcher said. "Wrestling teaches you how to maintain your weight and teaches discipline."

There's hole in athletics during the winter time in Arkansas. The only sport available in many, if not all, schools is basketball.

"I talked to the Athletic Directors and they want more opportunities for the kids. There's just 15 kids that get to play basketball, everybody else has nothing to do," explained Hatcher.

"This gives the small kid the opportunity, the late bloomer ... it's a great opportunity for all those kids," he said. "When CAC (Central Arkansas Christian) announced they were going to have

wrestling, they had 35 kids show up for the initial meeting and that's a lot for kids that have grown up in a state without wrestling and they don't know anything about it."

The goal, for Hatcher and those involved with the Arkansas Wrestling Association, was to provide that extra opportunity. He'll oversee the wrestling in the first "trial" year and once the minimum number of teams has been met for the Arkansas Activities Association to sponsor a state tournament – 16 – he'll hand it over.

"Lance Taylor of the Arkansas Activities Association has been extremely supportive and wonderful to work with," said Hatcher. "They want the sport in the state and they've been extremely supportive."

But where to start?

"Carter Lambert (President of CAC) has been instrumental," Hatcher said. "He was the first school I approached. He was an All-American in track and when I explained (the wrestling pitch) to him, he said, 'Yeah, we need it; we need it for the kids. Serving 15 basketball players isn't enough'."

So CAC was on board, so was Bentonville (home of Wal-Mart) and a handful of others came on. Then that number went to nine, and more are considering it, but to improve the fledgling wrestling movement in Arkansas, they'll have to leave the state's borders.

Who's going to wrestle against the Arkansas schools?

"Missouri, Tennessee and Oklahoma will," said Hatcher. "There's no problem there. We can go to tournaments. We can take kids if we have three guys at 103, we can run with that and have them wrestle and we're going to have tournaments here."

There's also another element to adding wrestling in Arkansas – the health of the high school student.

"(Wrestling) teaches them how to eat right and stay fit," said Hatcher. "Arkansas is one of the worst states when it comes to childhood obesity."

Hatcher referenced current Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and his goal to help combat childhood obesity. Gov. Huckabee has lost 110 pounds and run in the Little Rock Marathon twice and penned his fourth book, titled "Quit Digging Your Grave With a Knife and Fork."

There hasn't been much resistance with Hatcher's effort, other than financially, which Hatcher and sponsors have taken care of. But there's always one group of coaches to raise an eyebrow.

"Sometimes football coaches are a little worried that it might interfere with their football season, but we've had football coaches step up and be the head wrestling coach because they know wrestling makes you a better football player," said Hatcher. "(Wrestling) teaches you balance and positioning."

The University of Arkansas' top tackler last season was former Georgia state placewinner Sam Olajubutu.

The Arkansas Wrestling Association is also planning a January trip to Stillwater, Okla., for a tour of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame and to attend the Iowa-Oklahoma State match at Gallagher-Iba Arena to give the state's newest wrestlers a chance to see one of the premier college wrestling rivalries.

For more information about the wrestling movement in Arkansas, check out the Arkansas Wrestling Association's website at www.arkwrestling.com